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People with Asthma May Be Struggling to Breathe This Winter

**By Melanie Reynolds
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My route to work each morning offers a spectacular view of the Helena Valley. But all too often lately, that view has been obscured by a blanket of smog that has me worrying about our friends and neighbors who have asthma.

This has been a tough winter for people with breathing problems. Weather patterns and geography have teamed up to cause six days of poor air quality so far this season (as of this writing). Analysis shows that most of the pollution comes from wood stoves and fireplaces. Exhaust from idling car engines is another big factor.

A 2012 health department survey found that Lewis and Clark County residents don't believe we have an air pollution problem here. Those with asthma would be among the first to say: "Wrong!" The fact is, Lewis and Clark County is close to violating standards for clean air set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, mostly because of winter temperature inversions.

Studies have shown that breathing outdoor particulate matter (like smoke) aggravates asthma and harms lung function. That's why we recommend that people with asthma or other breathing problems stay indoors and avoid heavy exercise when air quality is poor.

And that's why the county in 2011 passed a local ordinance banning the use of older and smokier wood stoves and fireplaces when air quality is poor. We may not be able to control temperature inversions, but we can control the amount of smog that builds up beneath them.

Help for Kids with Asthma

Asthma is a chronic inflammatory disease of the airways. Its symptoms are periodic wheezing, shortness of breath, coughing, and a tight chest. In Lewis and Clark County, almost 14 percent of adults report having had asthma at some point in their lives. Statistics for children aren't available.

To address this serious public health concern, the state Legislature in 2007 began funding a state asthma control program. This has made it possible for our health department to offer free help to families of children with asthma in Lewis and Clark, Broadwater, and Jefferson Counties.

Through this program, a trained nurse will visit a family's home to find ways to reduce exposure to the things that trigger asthma attacks. Special mattress and pillow covers, medication advice, and educational materials are also available. You can learn more about the program by calling 457-8976.

A former participant in our program had this to say about it: "I cringe on the days that the air quality is poor, because I wonder what this will mean for my son's asthma. But now, armed with the knowledge of how to better control his illness, I feel more confident sending him out the door to school, scheduling a family vacation, or letting him go to a friend's house. I wish I could control more of the factors that affect his asthma: these darn inversions, the best friend with pets, the grandparent who still smokes. But I can't control everything!"

Asthma Triggers

As this mother points out, air pollution is not the only factor that can bring on an asthma attack. The American Lung Association offers this list of asthma triggers:

- Respiratory infections like the flu or a cold (have you had your flu shot?)
- Foods that cause allergies, like shellfish or peanuts
- Other allergens, including dust mites, mold, and animal dander
- Tobacco smoke (paradoxically, smoking is more common among adults with asthma than without)
- Medications, like nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs
- Pollen
- Significant changes in weather and temperature
- Irritants from strong odors, like cleaning supplies and perfumes
- Stress
- Exercise

Controlling Asthma

For those of you who have asthma (or have kids with asthma), here are some things to consider as you work to keep it under control this winter:

Heating system. If you heat your home with wood, keep in mind that mold spores can travel inside on the logs. Have your flue and chimney inspected yearly, and make sure they vent properly to avoid backdrafts. If you have a forced-air furnace, change the filter at recommended intervals. Furnaces can blow lint, dust, and pet dander around, so dust and vacuum regularly.

Humidity. Dampness caused by showers, cooking, the dishwasher and dryer, and even perspiration can create an attractive habitat for dust mites. Use the exhaust fans in your kitchen and bathroom. Wash bedding at least weekly in hot water. Encase pillows and mattresses in allergen-impermeable zipper covers. Mop up condensation around windowsills to prevent mold growth.

Cold. Cold air affects the lungs. If you must venture out, breathe through the nose instead of the mouth and consider wearing a scarf to warm the air you breathe.

Odors. Using candles, using air fresheners, and other scented products can trigger asthma symptoms, especially when the house is closed up tight to keep out the cold. Keep these out of your home, and carry your rescue inhaler if you're likely to be somewhere these are present.

The state Department of Public Health and Human Services recommends that everyone who has asthma should have an asthma action plan. It should outline the recommended daily treatment, control measures, and how to handle worsening symptoms, including when to go to the doctor or emergency room. If you don't have an action plan, ask your health-care provider to help you create one.

For more information about asthma, visit the EPA at www.epa.gov/asthma or the Allergy and Asthma Network at www.aanma.org. Or call our asthma control program at 457-8976.